

The Aztec Empire was built on intensive agriculture. However, it began with the migration of nomadic peoples called the *Mexica* (me-SHEE-ka) into the Valley of Mexico. Settling on an island in today's Mexico City, the Aztecs founded Tenochtitlán in 1325 CE. By the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico City in 1521, approximately 200,000 Aztecs inhabited a series of islands linked by waterways and canals (drained by the Spanish as part of their conquest strategy). Agriculture laid the foundation for the growth of the Aztec population, although they still supplemented their diet with foraging, hunting, fishing, and swidden farming.

Maize (*Zea mays*) was the staple crop, and played a revered symbolic role in Aztec political and religious life. The phases of the lifecycle of corn were personified by sacred deities including Xilonen ("fresh tender corn," and the goddess of sweet corn and tamales), Cinteotl ("deified corn," or the Maize Cob Lord), and Chicomecoatl ("7 Serpent," mature, dried seed corn) ([metmuseum.org](http://metmuseum.org)).

Other important crops included beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*), squash (*Cucurbita* varieties), and maize. The Aztecs planted these crops, called the "Three Sisters," in close proximity: the maize stalks provide support for bean vines, and squash plants suppress weeds, growing low to the ground. This type of companion planting can produce high quantities of calories per acre. In addition, beans are "nitrogen-fixing" plants, which replace the nitrogen in the soil used by the maize. These three staple crops support soil sustainability and still provide nutrition for millions in the Americas today.

In addition to practicing traditional agriculture, the Aztecs employed an ingenious method of increasing farming acreage using the waterways surrounding their islands. They developed floating gardens, called *chinampas*. The chinampas were built by piling mud into a shallow area of water and planting willow trees in the corners. Roots of the trees would anchor the garden to the bottom of the lake, creating an artificial farming platform.